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Waiting For Reagan

A seemingly isolated decision on whether to send modern weapons to anti-Soviet Afghan rebels may determine the future of the Reagan Doctrine far beyond bloody Afghanistan.

Debate is heated in the Pentagon, where the Joint Chiefs of Staff, worried about Soviet reaction, have delayed the new weapons. There is also high-level CIA opposition. Pakistan's President Zia, whose country is at the cutting edge of Soviet power, shares no such timidity. Zia believes the new weapons might drive Moscow into serious negotiations and end its occupation.

Opposition from the CIA and the military is in truth a surface problem. The real cause of delay is President Reagan's own failure to compel the bureaucracy to carry out his doctrine of reversing the communist tide by helping freedom fighters across the world. In short Reagan has been silent.

The strong recommendation by Pentagon civilians, middle-level State Department officers and White House national security staffers to arm Afghan rebels with more than bows and arrows is a test that will decide the future of the Reagan Doctrine. It is up to the president to go beyond rhetoric. Weapons for Afghan rebels, aid to Nicaragua's contras and help for Angolan anti-Soviet guerrilla Jonas Savimbi all hinge on Reagan's determination to save his doctrine from death by disuse.

That is the opinion of Rep. James Courter of New Jersey, just back from a high-level congressional study tour that included Pakistan. He and other members of the delegation (which included administration officials) refused to discuss any aspect of the Afghan weapons question. Courter, no bomb-thrower, but a prudent student of national security, did make one comment to us: "If they can't muster the will and the discipline to make this tough decision, then where can they?"

The need for modern weapons in the hands of Afghan freedom fighters is not in doubt. The Soviets recently imported a new monster weapon, the 240-millimeter mortar, that has transformed their ability to rout out guerrillas hidden in the fastness of small valleys.

A new, slow-flying aircraft has given the Soviets a front-line reconnaissance they have never had before. Other new weapons being battle-tested against Afghan rebels are pouring in. Aid to the mujaheddin from friendly states that do not like the idea of Soviet conquest of Afghanistan will never by itself turn back that invasion.

Pakistan's Zia first proposed upgrading weapons for the rebels more than six months ago, and was turned down in Washington. He repeated his suggestion when the congressional delegation dined with him in Islamabad on its recent visit.

The joint chiefs are wary for two basic reasons. First, shoulder-fired Stingers (anti-aircraft weapons) would, sooner or later for the first time fall into hands of the Soviets, who could profit from Stinger technology.

The second reason is more profound. Given Soviet power in that region and its proximity to Pakistan, the military brass worries about a sudden military reaction by the Kremlin when Stingers knock out dread Soviet MI-25 helicopter gunships. The U.S. logistic and supply-line base is thousands of miles away.

But Reagan never pretended that carrying out his doctrine would be risk-free. Zia, whose vulnerable nation has the most to lose, is willing to take his share of that overall risk. Moreover, there is an upside trade-off: Zia's conviction that the Soviets, traditionally conservative in military policy, would move toward withdrawal, not bigger war.

That is why the strongest backers of the Reagan Doctrine, viewing the decision on Afghan rebel aid as crucial, say privately that the president must make clear to his own administration the depth of his commitment. White House Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan has been quietly advised by these supporters of the doctrine to set up an Oval Office command post to oversee all special aid programs in support of major anticommunist movements.

Presidential oversight could work magic in clearing away parochial worries of military leaders, whose instinctive attitude is to avoid risk-taking. In Zbigniew Brzezinski's phrase, it would end "managerial neglect." The idea of helping the Afghans gets enthusiastic support at the Pentagon outside the joint chiefs, and there is no monolithic opposition even within the chiefs. CIA bureaucrats, still carrying the wounds of congressional probes a decade ago, are nervous about such enterprises but would quickly fall in line if nudged by the president.

Upping the ante in Afghanistan would demonstrate that Reagan has the will to make his doctrine work. That is a message bearing important consequences not only on Capitol Hill, at the Pentagon and the CIA—but in the Kremlin as well.